

Sermon HIW 15th April 2018

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Text: 1 Peter 5, 1 - 7 (Misericordias Domini)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I had never consciously come across the text for today's sermon before, but the more I got into it the more exciting it became. It all starts quite normally for the end of an epistle, of a biblical letter which in this case Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, claims to have written.

Theological scholars, however, date the letter round about the year 90 A.D. or even later. By using the disciple's name as sender the unknown author wants to underline his authority, which was quite common; on the other hand the writer is very knowledgeable of the bible and especially of the theology of the apostle Paul. That's probably why he phrases the introduction of the end of his letter like Paul usually does:

In verse 1 we read: *To the elders among you, I appeal...*

Sounds like Paul's writing. At that time "appealing" to members of a congregation implies both advice and encouragement and also even comfort. The "elders" to whom the writer appeals are not necessarily old people, they are more likely people who have been appointed to be responsible for the running of the congregation's life and business.

And what does the writer advise and encourage them to do?

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Speaking in more modern terms all this is about leadership and about shaping church. How should and could Christians organize their lives as Christians in a congregation? And how should those who are responsible lead God's flock? - And that's where it gets exciting.

2 ½ years ago I met Dr Steffi Burkhardt in a talk about current changes in the world of work and the challenges for leadership. Ms Burkhardt belongs to the so called Generation Y, that's those who were born between 1980 and 1995. While doing her doctorate in health psychology she worked for two years in the workplace health management of a subsidiary of a big company. She describes her experiences there as follows: bureaucracy rather than democracy; paternalism rather than giving people responsibility, monitoring rather than workers' participation, many Yes-sayers rather than looking for the meaning of it all which may lead to say "No" at times.

Mind you, the traditional way of leading companies is widely spread and has worked successfully and effectively for a long time. Lately, however, new concepts have been coming into view. Not only younger people complain and criticize that leaders and top executives confuse leading people with "technical management". More and more companies

therefore, in order to gain motivated and creative staff, try and follow a new concept of leadership which can be described as working together at eye level. Ms Burkhart is very clear about this. She now refuses to work in companies which follow a strong hierarchy. She instead prefers to work in teams in which everybody is appreciative of each other. Colleagues support each other and promote each other's potentials. Not the boss is the center but the team. The function of the boss is not to push on or speed up but rather to be coach and mentor.

What are the concepts of leadership in the churches?

Due to a long development in church history there is not one answer to this. It is different in the Catholic, the Lutheran and the Reformed Church with a declining grade of hierarchical structures. We all know: in the Catholic Church the pope has the final say, in Lutheran churches it is their bishops (and synods) and in the Reformed Church it is the individual congregations which decide on most of their issues.

But what was it like in the early Christian time? How was it when the first Christian congregations were being formed? Well, they tried to imitate what Jesus had taught them. In Matthew chapter 23 Jesus criticizes the teachers of the law harshly: *Everything they do is done for men to see... They love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market-places and to have men call them "Rabbi". But, Jesus says, you are not to be called "Rabbi" for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.* You are all brothers and sisters – the apostle Paul takes up on that and explicitly includes himself when he writes to the Corinthians: *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy...* Later, when the congregations grew and conflicts arose both among the Christians and because of the persecution by the Roman Empire, seven men were chosen who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom, as is recorded in Acts chapter 6. Obviously it was not a contradiction at that time to have responsible people as mediators and supervisors, so to speak, and at the same time to live together in a democratic way where everybody was regarded as equal and where no hierarchy was necessary. It must have had a sustainable impact on the first congregations which came into being to know of Paul's picture of a congregation. In 1st Corinthians he describes the congregation as the body of Christ with many, yet different parts, each of which, however, have the same importance and only Christ is the head.

The writer of our letter of 1st Peter must have had this in mind when he addresses the congregation he writes to. Let's have a look at it again in more detail:

Firstly, there must have been some of the elders who were either talked into serving as overseers or even compelled to take on this task. Sounds familiar? Do you know people, maybe also in the church or in the world of work or in politics who do their job rather

reluctantly because they don't really want to do it? I hope this won't be the case with the newly elected members for the church sessions, but I remember a church officer who told me years ago that he was asked or rather told to go into the Landeskirchenamt, the administration office. Would he have dared not to obey? Oh no, he was convinced it was his duty to agree because he was called. I must admit that I couldn't help thinking at that time, yeah, this explains why he does his work the way he was doing it. Or how is it with sons or daughters who are very strongly expected and sometime even forced to follow their father in leading the family-run business. What does it do with them and to their motivation and leadership? *Not because you must*, the writer of our letter says, but because you are willing, of your own free will, as God wants you to be.

Secondly, there must have been some of the elders who took on their task out of ulterior motives. They were greedy for money. Sounds familiar? Unfortunately avarice or greed has been a prominent feature in companies and banks over years now. By no means all, but some managers are focused on maximizing their profits at the cost of the well-being of their staff. They rather invest in hedge funds than creating more jobs, not to mention the vast field of bribery and corruption in economic affairs. And even in the church there are people who are focused on their career and on earning more money than on serving people. Be eager to serve, we read in our text, which of course implies: from the bottom of your heart.

Thirdly, there must have been elders who lorded it over those entrusted to them. Sounds familiar? It's frightening how dangerous people can become who act up as Lords. I am certain we all can think of people in politics or in the economic system who like to be the boss and misuse their being in charge of others. They indulge in having power, threatening others, being in the lime light and being admired or feared by others. Again and again this causes conflicts, also in churches and congregations. No, that's not on, rather be examples, we read. Be an example to the flock. Be coach or mentor. Or in biblical terms: Be good shepherds. Be good shepherds like your Head Shepherd. In his leadership he didn't lord it over others, he rather served them, he did without mighty power and brought people together, he didn't mistreat his sheep, but cared for them and even did everything to find this one sheep which was lost. Follow him, be like him. The question is: Can we believe that we are not only sheep, but also commissioned by Jesus to be shepherds? Can we believe that Jesus as our good shepherd has liberated us from only focusing on ourselves so that we are able to turn to others, to our neighbors, to care for them and to serve them?

Through these questions it becomes clearer that being good leaders or living together in a congregation not in a strictly hierarchical order but in an appreciative way is not first and foremost a question of morals but rather a question of faith or, as one might say today, it is a

question of your true intrinsic motivation. If you are convinced, if you truly believe in what God wants you to be, then you will also live in his image.

This would have consequences for how in our world and society congregations and churches could become examples for how to live together in peace. Dr Steffi Burkhart spoke about how important it is not to ignore people's potentials by giving them orders they have to follow, but on the contrary to lift and use people's abilities, to appreciate the best that is in every single person so that he or she can grow and work more happily. The bible describes our potentials as charisma or gifts, spiritual gifts, because they are given to us by the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Paul puts it: *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.* [1 Cor. 12]

What this means can be seen e.g. in our monthly Hannover International Worship. There are some who do the readings or the announcements, others are responsible for Sunday School or preach, yet others bring finger food and serve tea and coffee, we get together and talk and listen and share joys and concerns. And we come together, as today, to join in Holy Communion, to receive bread and wine, to get strengthened and sent again to try and live not as Lords but as holy people, as saints which we have been since our baptism. As such, *all of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another.* What a powerful guideline! And the good news in our world of perfection is - it sounds banal but is completely true: nobody needs to be perfect when following Jesus be it as elders or young people, be it commissioned with special responsibilities or not. Let me just remind you of Jesus' disciple Peter. Remember? He was not strong when Jesus was about to be crucified; he failed, he denied knowing him and disowned him three times, yet he was pardoned and in the end even became the rock on which Jesus wanted to start to build God's kingdom. Pure grace. Let's remember this when receiving Holy Communion: As somebody put it: We all are pardoned failures. And as Christians we will be recognized not through how much glamour or radiance we shed but through how we deal with our failings. Let's therefore keep in mind what is promised to us: *Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.* In this way let's be good shepherds to one another and joyfully live as God's people.

And may the grace and peace of God which transcends all understanding guard your hearts and minds in the risen Christ, our Lord and Savior, Amen